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# Unlocking Opportunities: Open Data in the United States

Government-generated data is an important asset that can serve as a powerful engine for creating new jobs, promoting economic growth, and enabling innovation. At the state, municipal, and federal level, agencies collect and generate vast quantities of data that offer unique insights into virtually every facet of the modern world, from satellite imagery that can help predict the weather to transportation data that can help reduce congestion. Open data policies help to ensure that the value of non-sensitive government data is enhanced by getting it into the hands of stakeholders who can do amazing things with it.

## What Is Open Data?

**Open data is non-sensitive government data that is made freely available to the public in non-proprietary, machine readable formats via non-restrictive licenses.** It is used by the private sector, non-governmental organizations, research institutions, and citizens to unlock opportunities, create new areas of collaboration, and foster economic growth, particularly when used in conjunction with dynamic new technologies like artificial intelligence (AI).

## The Benefits of Open Data

Collaboration around open data can unlock opportunities that spark the economy and fuel job growth in virtually every industry sector. Many states and municipal governments have already embraced the opportunities that arise when data is made open by default.



### SPARKING PRIVATE SECTOR INNOVATION: A SMARTER TOOL FOR ANALYZING CITIES

**Making data assets available to the public can lead to private sector innovation, especially when those data assets are uniquely held by the government and not available elsewhere.** [Urban Footprint](#) is a software company that provides a customizable platform displaying community land use data, transportation networks and trends, population, employment, and more. Based on publicly available open data and commercially acquired data, the tool can be used by governments, NGOs, and private companies. For example, real estate developers can use the platform to analyze site suitability and evaluate if a certain parcel of land will be a good investment for their company, or food banks can determine where the most vulnerable populations live to better serve people suffering from food insecurity.



## TARGETING COMMUNITY NEEDS: REDUCING THE RISK OF FIRE IN ATLANTA

**Open data can be paired with data from other sources to provide important services and monitor the impact of intersectional challenges.** The Atlanta fire department partnered with NGO Data Science for Good and students at Georgia Tech to create [Firebird](#), a software tool used to evaluate which commercial properties in the city were at the greatest risk of fire. By pulling together data from wide-ranging sources including the Atlanta Fire Rescue Department, the City of Atlanta, the State of Georgia, and the US Census Bureau, researchers were able to identify more than 6,000 previously unidentified properties that qualified for fire inspection. The team was then able to build an additional model that assigned a fire risk score to each property, allowing inspectors with scarce resources to efficiently schedule inspection of buildings most at risk for a fire incident.



## IMPROVING GOVERNMENT SERVICES: MONITORING REGIONAL TRANSIT SYSTEMS IN ILLINOIS

**Open data can make government more efficient and free up resources while providing new insights about existing processes.** As stay-at-home orders took effect at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, transit authorities were left scrambling to understand what the extreme fall in ridership would mean for their budgets and the future of the systems they manage. The Regional Transit Authority of Northeastern Illinois (RTA) manages the long-term finances of Chicago's three major transit providers. In pre-pandemic times, RTA could fulfill its mission by analyzing ridership data that each of the transit providers reported on a monthly basis. The quickly evolving impacts of COVID-19 made faster data cycles a necessity, so RTA developed a dashboard that leveraged open data to provide its stakeholders with dynamically updated ridership information. The dashboard enabled RTA to disseminate mission-critical information about the localized impacts on transit availability and how the pandemic had impacted ridership. The tool freed up internal staff resources by allowing journalists and policymakers to independently access the most up-to-date information online instead of placing a call to RTA staff for updates.



## ESTABLISHING A LEGAL FOUNDATION

Formalizing policies that are critical to supporting open data efforts can help your state reap the benefits of its unique data assets. Sustainable open data frameworks should include features such as a **Legislative Framework** that will help your program withstand changes in executive leadership, ensure that the program is eligible for adequate funding, and demonstrate an all-of-government commitment to its success. In addition, appointing a **Chief Data Officer (CDO)** and establishing a **Public-Private Advisory Council** can ensure that the state leverages its data resources effectively and “publishes with purpose”—i.e., prioritizes the release of data that is relevant to specific social, environmental, economic, technological, scientific, or educational challenges. Finally, creating an **Open Data Portal** that provides the community with efficient access to state government data in machine-readable formats and under open licenses helps ensure that data is as useful as possible for the widest range of applications.

To learn more about BSA's work on open data, visit <https://www.bsa.org/policy-issues/opendata>.

To view additional resources for open data policymaking from the National Conference of State Legislatures, visit <https://www.ncsl.org/research/telecommunications-and-information-technology/state-open-data-laws-and-policies.aspx>.